Romney, Paul Battle for Lead in Iowa...Santorum Surges, Perry in Mix, Gingrich Stumbles
*** Complete Tables for Poll Appended ***

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This NBC News/Marist Poll Reports:

With just days until the Iowa caucus, Mitt Romney and Ron Paul are in a virtual dead heat. Romney receives the support of 23% to Paul’s 21%, well within this NBC News/Marist Poll’s margin of error, among likely Republican caucus-goers including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate. Rick Santorum who was in single digits earlier this month has bounced into the pack along with Rick Perry. Newt Gingrich, ahead in NBC News/Marist’s early December survey, has seen his support cut by just more than half.

Here is how the contest stands among likely Republican caucus-goers including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate and the difference from earlier this month:

- 23% for Mitt Romney (+4)
- 21% for Ron Paul (+2)
- 15% for Rick Santorum (+9)
- 14% for Rick Perry (+4)
- 13% for Newt Gingrich (-15)
- 6% for Michele Bachmann (-1)
- 2% for Jon Huntsman (No change)
- 7% are undecided (-2)

“There has been a lot of movement in the past month,” says Dr. Lee M. Miringoff, Director of The Marist College Institute for Public Opinion. “This is a contest that is very unsettled.”

In NBC News/Marist’s survey in early December, 28% of likely Republican caucus-goers including leaners supported Gingrich followed by Paul and Romney who each received 19%. Perry garnered 10% of participants’ support while 7% favored Bachmann. Santorum received 6%, and 2% were for Huntsman. Nine percent, at the time, were undecided.
Among the larger pool of potential Republican caucus-goers including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate, 23% back Romney compared with 20% for Paul. Perry receives the support of 14% as does Gingrich. 12% are behind Santorum while 5% rally for Bachmann and 2% support Huntsman. 10% are undecided.

Key points:

- Among likely Republican caucus-goers who are conservative or very conservative including those who are undecided yet leaning toward a candidate, 21% are for Romney compared with 18% for Santorum and the same proportion -- 18% -- for Paul.
- Paul -- 28% -- and Romney -- 27% -- vie for the lead among those who are liberal or moderate.
- Looking at Tea Party supporters overall, Santorum receives 20% compared with 17% for Romney and the same proportion -- 17% -- for Paul. Gingrich garners 16% of these participants. However, among those who are strong supporters of the Tea Party, Gingrich and Santorum each receive 22%.
- Among likely Republican caucus-goers who do not support the Tea Party, Romney -- 27% -- edges Paul -- 24%.
- Nearly one in four likely Republican caucus-goers who are Evangelical Christians -- 24% -- back Santorum. This compares with 21% for Perry.
- Looking at age, 38% of likely Republican caucus-goers under 30 years old and 22% of those 30 to 44 years old back Paul. Among those 45 to 59 years old, it's Romney with 23% and Santorum and Paul who each receive 19%. Romney -- 29% -- does the best among those who are 60 and older.

Majority Firmly Committed to Candidate, but Many Remain Uncertain

With the clock ticking down to the caucus, only 53% of likely Republican caucus-goers report they strongly support their choice of candidate. 33% say they are somewhat committed to their pick, and 13% think they might vote differently on Tuesday. Only 2% are unsure.

There has been an increase in the proportion of voters who say they will not waver in their support. When NBC News/Marist last reported this question in early December, 40% said they were firmly behind their choice. The same proportion -- 40% -- was somewhat committed to their candidate while 19% said they could change their mind. Only 1%, at that time, was unsure.

Key points:

- Nearly six in ten likely Republican caucus-goers who support Santorum -- 59% -- are firmly committed to him. This compares with 54% of Paul's backers, 52% of
those who rally for **Perry**, and 51% of those who are behind **Romney**. 46% of **Gingrich’s** supporters express a similar level of support.

**Romney, Perry Top List as Second Choice**

When it comes to the second choice of likely Republican caucus-goers who have a candidate preference, 21% pick Romney while Perry is the second selection of 20%. Santorum receives 15% followed by Gingrich with 13%. Bachmann is next with 11% followed closely by Paul with 9%. Huntsman is the second pick of 3%, and 8% are undecided.

**Key points:**

- Romney is the second choice of 38% of **Gingrich’s backers**, 34% of **Paul’s supporters**, and 25% of those behind **Perry**.
- Perry -- 35% -- is the second choice of those who support **Santorum**.
- Among those who back **Romney**, there is little consensus. 20% pick Gingrich as their second choice, 19% select Santorum, and 18% choose Perry.

**Santorum, Paul Considered to be True Conservatives, but Gingrich Perceived to Be Best Debate Match for Obama**

When it comes to the candidate who is the **true conservative** in the race, 23% of likely Republican caucus-goers believe Santorum deserves that title followed closely by Paul with 21%. 16% say Bachmann is the true conservative while 11% have this view of Perry. Seven percent believe Romney is the real conservative, and 6% say the same about Gingrich. Only 2% categorize Huntsman in this way. Four percent say none of the candidates deserve this title, and 9% are undecided.

However, when it comes to the **best debater against President Barack Obama**, 37% believe Gingrich is the best opponent. Here, Romney follows with 26%. 13% think Paul can best debate the president compared with 7% for Perry. Four percent think Bachmann is the best debate match against the president compared with 3% who have this view of Santorum. Just 1% gives Huntsman top debate honors while 2% believe none of the candidates can adequately take on the president in a debate. Seven percent are undecided.

Which is more important to likely Republican caucus-goers? A majority -- 54% -- want a Republican nominee who is a true conservative while 39% prefer one who can best battle it out with Obama in the debates. Seven percent are unsure.
Romney, Santorum Considered Acceptable Candidates…Loss of Confidence in Gingrich

Half of likely Republican caucus-goers -- 50% -- think Romney is an acceptable candidate for the GOP nomination. 27% share this view but have reservations while 21% say he is an unacceptable choice. Three percent are unsure. In NBC News/Marist’s previous survey in Iowa, fewer than half -- 46% -- thought Romney fit the bill.

When looking at Santorum’s acceptability, 49% believe he is a good fit for the role while 22% report he will do, but they have some concerns. The same proportion -- 22% -- says Santorum is an unacceptable pick, and 7% are unsure.

When it comes to Perry, there has been a slight increase in the proportion of likely Republican caucus-goers who believe he is an acceptable choice for the nomination. 44% have this view while 29% say the same but with concerns. 24% think Perry is not a good match for the role, and 4% are unsure. Perry was perceived to be an acceptable choice by 38% in NBC News/Marist’s previous survey in Iowa.

Likely Republican caucus-goers are more uncertain about Bachmann’s acceptability. Here, 37% say Bachmann is a good fit for the nomination while 25% agree but have hesitations. 34%, however, think Bachmann is an unacceptable choice, and 3% are unsure.

Looking at Paul, 35% believe he is a good fit for the role while 21% agree but with reservations. 41% say he is an unacceptable pick, and 3% are unsure. Earlier this month, 38% of likely Republican caucus-goers thought Paul was a good match for the GOP nomination.

Gingrich has slipped from grace in the eyes of likely Republican caucus-goers. 35% think Gingrich is a good fit for the nomination. 28% report he is acceptable for the role, but they have some reservations. 35%, however, say he is an unacceptable choice, and 3% are unsure. Earlier this month, Gingrich was the only candidate in the GOP field perceived by a majority of likely Republican caucus-goers -- 54% -- to be a good fit for the nomination with only 16% describing him as not acceptable.
Shared Values Tops List of Participants’ Priorities

What matters most to likely Republican caucus-goers? Three in ten -- 30% -- want a candidate who shares their values while 28% think electability is the most important factor. 23% prefer a candidate who is closest to them on the issues while 15% want someone with the experience to govern. Four percent are unsure.

There has been a change on this question. In NBC News/Marist’s early December survey, more than three in ten likely Republican caucus-goers -- 31% -- wanted a candidate who was closest to them on the issues while 29% desired someone who shared their values. Electability was key for 21% of likely Republican caucus-goers, and 16% preferred a candidate with experience. Two percent, at that time, were unsure.

Key points:

- Santorum -- 25% -- has surged among those who want a candidate who shares their values. Paul receives 21% from this group of participants.
- Romney -- 34% -- has the advantage among those who value electability in a candidate. Gingrich trails behind with 18% of these likely Republican caucus-goers followed by Perry with 16%.
- Romney also does well among those who want a candidate who has the experience to govern. Here, 29% back Romney compared with 22% for Paul and 19% for Gingrich.
- Among those who prefer a candidate who is closest to them on the issues, Paul leads with 34% to 23% for Romney.

Getting to Know the Candidates

The candidates are making their final pitch to caucus-goers in Iowa. In the last month, 86% of likely Republican caucus-goers report being contacted by at least one of the campaigns.

The proportions of likely Republican caucus-goers who have been contacted by each of the following:

- 72% Paul campaign
- 69% Perry campaign
- 68% Romney campaign
- 68% Gingrich campaign
- 62% Bachmann campaign
- 44% Santorum campaign
Most in Iowa Do Not Want Palin or Bush to Run

Sarah Palin recently said there is still time for a Republican candidate to enter the race for the GOP nomination. Do likely Republican caucus-goers want Palin to jump in? 81% do not while 14% do. Six percent are unsure.

A run by Jeb Bush is only slightly more acceptable. 70% do not want Bush to enter the contest while 17% do. 13% are unsure.

Majority Believes Mormons are Christians

55% of likely Republican caucus-goers in Iowa believe a Mormon is a Christian while 45% think a Mormon is not a Christian, or they are unsure.

Earlier this month, the same proportions shared these views. A majority of likely Republican caucus-goers -- 55% -- reported a Mormon was a Christian while 45% thought the opposite or were unsure.

Key points:

- While Romney -- 30% -- is ahead among those who think a **Mormon is a Christian**, Paul -- 20% -- edges Santorum -- 18% -- and Perry -- 16% -- among those who believe a **Mormon is not a Christian or are unsure**. Gingrich receives 14% of these participants compared with 13% for Romney.

Obama’s Job Approval Rating at 45%

Voters divide about President Obama’s job approval rating. 45% of registered voters in Iowa approve of the job the president is doing in office while 43% disapprove, and 12% are unsure.

Views of the president’s performance in office have flipped. In NBC News/Marist’s previous survey in Iowa, 43% approved while 46% disapproved. 12%, at the time, were unsure.